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Terrorism and the nuclear threat

Power plants, plutonium stockpiles may need more security

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Washington

The pistol, the car bomb, the hijack are the tools of terrorists today. In the future, will nuclear weapons be added to their arsenals?

Attacks of recent weeks, some experts say, should make one thing clear: The world must intensify efforts to prevent terrorist acquisition of nuclear explosives.

Nuclear terrorism, "while possible, is by no means inevitable," says Brian Jenkins, a specialist on terrorism for the Rand Corporation.

There have been no incidents of nuclear terrorism in the 40-year history of the nuclear age. But the possibility of a skilled, determined terrorist organization holding an American city hostage to the threat of nuclear destruction is very real, said most participants of a conference here this week on nuclear terrorism.

Such an event, they said, is more likely than a Soviet nuclear attack or an invasion of Western Europe.

Several trends may be increasing the likelihood of nuclear terrorism. For one, terrorists are more technically sophisticated and more violent. For another, world stockpiles of separated plutonium — the raw material for bombs, which is produced by the military or as a by-product of nuclear power — are growing.

"It is projected that the amount of plutonium [under civilian control] in the world will exceed the superpowers' military stocks within the next decade," says retired Adm. Thomas Davies, former chief of naval development.

It would be a relatively simply matter for a determined group to hijack radioactive material, most experts here said. Shipments to and from civilian power plants are still lightly guarded in many countries. In the United States, a number of universities store finished, weapons-grade uranium for use in research, with little security to speak of.

Once terror groups had the heart of the device, they also wouldn't find it difficult to construct a crude bomb, weapon designers say. They might even make one small enough to fit in a Dodge minivan.

Such a device would basically be two pellets of plutonium in a tube, to be smashed together with explosives. It would be relatively inefficient, and might not go off at all — but its mere existence could result in blackmail on a na-

tional scale.

This scenario has long been a staple of thriller novels and made-for-TV movies. But experts also worry about a less-publicized method of nuclear terrorism: sabotage of atomic power plants. At many nuclear utilities, a large truck bomb — even if exploded outside the plant perimeter — could have disastrous effects, Admiral Davies notes.

Terrorists could also steal a ready-made nuclear device from a superpower arsenal. A 1978 report of the Central Intelligence Agency identified military nuclear depots in Western Europe as prime terrorist targets. But military installations are much more tightly guarded than civilian uranium stores.

Acquisition of nuclear material would represent a quantum leap in terrorist capability. But there are also strong incentives for terrorist groups to not go nuclear, says Mr. Jenkins.

Terrorists do have constituents, and acquisition of a nuclear bomb could scare off even hardened backers, he says. Revulsion in world public opinion would be unprecedented. The terrorist cell itself might split over the issue; the topic of use of violence is a prime cause of dispute in such groups.

There is also much that governments can do to head off nuclear terrorism, said experts at the conference, sponsored by the Nuclear Control Institute and the State University of New York. Preventive actions mentioned include:

- More careful handling of nuclear power plant fuel. Security during transport should be increased. If possible, the West should agree on a limited number of fuel reprocessing and storage facilities in a few key nations. "We should be at least as careful about plutonium as we are about gold," says physicist Bernard Feld of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

- More international cooperation. The US and the USSR have already agreed to hold two meetings a year on nuclear proliferation. Nuclear terrorism could easily be part of these meetings' agenda.

- Stepped-up intelligence. The US must have better information on plans of terror groups, experts say.

- More safeguards on nuclear weapons. Many US nuclear warheads have safety catches that are intended to prevent unauthorized use — a design that could be made available to other nuclear nations.